鎌池和馬

とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）10周年

―食蜂操祈フィギュア編―

鎌池和馬

DENGEKI HOBBY
電撃ホビーマガジン

Part 1

"Dolls."

Shokuhou Misaki had just gotten out of the bath, so she only wore a bath towel inside her Tokiwadai Middle School dorm room.

That prestigious esper powers development school had two dorms, but this was the one inside the special district known as the School Garden. Needless to say, this was because she did not want to live in the same building as the other Level 5 who she did not at all get along with.

"Items modeled after humans have developed independently all around the world, but their origins are almost always connected to the dead. They summon or preserve the souls of the dead. When a great king dies, they are placed in his grave as a simplified version of the sacrifices that would normally accompany him, etc. etc. This topic may seem out of place for a city of cutting-edge technology and esper powers development like Academy City, but the most popular dolls in the world are the Christian sculptures of the Son of God. At the very least, many people create them, believing that they have some kind of effect."

There was no one else in the room with her.

Nor was she speaking to anyone.

She held a large pamphlet in her hand as she used a towel to get out the last bits of moisture that not even a drier could get from her hair.

"Once religion and art could be separated and art become a mere indulgence, the culture of dolls quickly grew. But the more detailed the doll the more 'uncanny' people find it, which may be a remnant of the religious practices. This doll museum sets aside all speculation, rumors, and preconceptions to study the origins of and changes in the dolls that have remained by mankind's side for so long. It also demonstrates the dolls of a new era using models made with 3D printers and holomodels that can be touched and held thanks to the tactile feedback of an electronically controlled suit. Valuable dolls from around the world and their technological information have been gathered here."

Shokuhou Misaki tossed the pamphlet to aside. Annoyed that it fell limply to the ground instead of flying like a frisbee, she threw herself onto the bed. She jumped too much and ended up bouncing a little as if on a trampoline.

When she rolled onto her back, the bath towel fell away, revealing her notable body lines.

“Ahh, ahh... These school events are such a pain.”

This was the preliminary material for a social studies field trip they would be going on in the near future.

At times like that, Tokiwadai Middle School tended to send one of their two Level 5s to give an introductory speech as a school representative. The other one tended to act the commoner and play dumb, so the requests were generally shoved onto Shokuhou Misaki instead.

She could use Mental Out, the most powerful mental esper power, but she did not consider using her remote control to get out of it. More importantly, she unfortunately kind of liked it when people relied on her and let her stand above everyone else, so she was a tad reluctant to manipulate everyone’s memories to erase the event altogether.

That meant preparing the old fashioned way was the only option left.

She needed to study up on the bare minimum of knowledge so she would not mess up her speech and so she would not think she knew more than she did.

“Phew...”

A long but quiet sigh of exhaustion filled the room.

However, Shokuhou Misaki frowned in confusion as she lay on the bed.

Yes, *it had not come from her*.

She sat up on the bed, pulled the bath towel back up to her chest, and slowly turned her puzzled face toward the sound.

The window was open by just a few centimeters.

The curtain was fluttering a little, but there was no wind this night. Something else was moving the fabric.

She saw something on the windowsill.

It was a slender girl with long honey-blonde hair and sparkling eyes. But she was only twenty centimeters tall.

(A doll???)

“What is this?” muttered Shokuhou as she approached the window.

The clothes were strange. Overall, they resembled a white and black bunny girl costume, but fabric had been removed all over. For example, the navel was completely exposed.

“Did this thing speak?”

She ignored the strange first impression and observed it more closely. The details resembled her quite a bit. Also, it waved both hands at her with surprisingly smooth movements.

“Ahh... I finally got up here☆ Well, the height wasn’t much of an issue with this thing’s flight ability, but I had some trouble when a crow tried to eat me on the way up.”

The doll stroked a surfboard-like object held under one arm.

“Yes, the voice is definitely coming from this. Let’s see...um, where is the switch? On the back?”

“Dwah!? W-w-wait! Don’t flip me upside down like that!! There’s nothing between my legs!!”

It may have had a gyro inside like a video game controller because it reacted when she turned it upside down and shook it. That seemed like an excessive amount of technology, but that was not what had caught her interest.

“Why does thing look like me with so exactly like me?”

“Wait a second. I’ll explain everything, so don’t make upside-down into my default position... Hey, wait! Why are you stripping me!?”

“Hmm. There aren’t any ball joints even underneath he gloves. Wow...it’s accurate here? ...Oh, dear. And here too!? Did they base this on the System Scan data? But then how did they know about these places no one ever sees?”

“Listen.”

The doll’s voice grew an octave lower.

Her torso was held in Shokuhou’s hand, so she slammed her fist into the white spot at the base of Shokuhou’s fingernail.

“How about you actually look at me now!? Stop treating me like a ‘thing’ and quit acting like you’re alone!!”

“Ow!? I’m going to destroy this doll!!”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!? Are you some kid with frightening cruelty ability who likes adding drills to his toys!?”

That nonsense did not matter.

Basically, someone had detailed data on Shokuhou Misaki. That alone was a problem. It was possible the doll was an unmanned surveillance device sending back camera footage, so Shokuhou made sure her bath towel was tightly wrapped around her body.

After she threw the doll of herself to the floor, it tearfully gathered up its tiny clothing and began dressing itself.

“For one thing, I’m not a doll.”

“What? Don’t tell me you think you’re a tiny fairy or something.”

Shokuhou was really speaking to whoever was controlling the doll than the doll itself, and the doll looked somehow upset with that.

“I’m a product of Anatomy Mechatronics... Well, from what I can see, that probably isn’t enough for you to understand. You’re giving off the aura of someone who can’t set their TV to record and has to ask the neighbor boy for help.”

“Now, do I have anything that can burn? Oh, right. I think I have an aroma candle.”

“Why are you pulling on my legs!?”

“Explain.”

“I-it’s a project that branched off from cyborg research.”

“Cyborg?”

“...Don’t tell me I have to explain that too.”

The bunny doll escaped Shokuhou’s hands, landed on the floor again, and continued.

“They make exact copies of a powerful esper’s skeleton, muscles, organs, blood vessels, and nerves. In other words, they create a perfect model using pure technology. That’s the Anatomy Mechatronics project.”

“...”

“Once it’s complete, the size doesn’t matter. Since making a giant robot version of you would be pretty useless, they shrank it down for easier storage and transportation. And that’s me♪”

She waved her small hand.

“So I get hungry and I sleep at night. On paper, I’m a collection of medical technology, but the machines perfectly modeled on your organs extract energy in the exact same way as your organs.”

“I have one question.”

“Just one?”

“Have you also perfectly copied my brain...no, my Mental Out?”

The look in Shokuhou’s eyes made it clear she might swing her fist down and smash the thing to pieces depending on the answer, but the doll waved her rabbit ears and shrugged.

“Maybe it would be simplest to say I’m a copy of everything but your brain. If Anatomy Mechatronics had that ability, all of the unstable and uncontrollable Level 5s would have been disposed of, right?”

That was a good point, but Shokuhou was not about to just trust her.

This explanation about Anatomy Mechatronics could easily be a bluff. There was also the cyborg named Rensa who had drawn on other people’s powers to switch between multiple Level 5 powers. If this doll had perfectly reproduced Shokuhou Misaki’s body, then a similar danger could exist.

But if no amount of questioning would erase her doubts, then what was she supposed to do?

In nothing but a bath towel, she brought a hand to her forehead in thought.

Finally, she spoke.

“So why did you come to my room?”

“So we’re fiiiiiinally getting to the main point. The Professor who made me was captured and can’t escape, so I want you to save her with your Mental Out.”

Shokuhou groaned at the established series of events she saw coming.

She had no obligation to save this Professor. In fact, she wanted to actively send them to hell. But to accurately judge the threat of Anatomy Mechatronics and erase the detailed data on her body used to create the doll (Oh, honestly. This is even more embarrassing than a naked photo.), she needed to contact this Professor.

The doll in front of her eyes was a doll. If she really was made from pure technology as she claimed, then Shokuhou could not control her with Mental Out which could only affect human minds. She could read the residual information left in objects, but that had likely been wiped clean.

This had been calculated out so she would be forced to act no matter what.

It made her head hurt, but there was no other answer.

“Fine then... But I might just kick this Professor’s ass the instant I rescue her.”

Part 2

The doll said her name was Misaki.

Shokuhou Misaki threw the doll into her handbag and left the dorm. She walked through the special district of the School Garden and made her way to the exit.

Tokiwadai Middle School was extremely strict about its curfew and had guards out at night, but she did not slip out the window, sneak along the walls, and zip from shadow to shadow. She already controlled everyone in the area. If she wanted to, she could use a

single remote control to vanish from everyone's mind and walk right through like she was invisible. (Although she could not fool the cameras and sensors.)

After leaving the School Garden without incident and entering the dangerous city night the adults always warned them about, she looked down at a large pamphlet as she walked.

It was the material on that doll museum.

Misaki poked her upper body out of the handbag and spoke.

"Calling it a doll museum is a complete lie. It's actually a secret prison that closes people in a giant vault."

"Well, I was curious why it had so much security given how few people visit and how little income it receives. I thought it might be wasting grant money, but I guess it's actually running a different business on the side."

Academy City of course had its official prisons, but what did they do with incidents that could not be made public or when they did not have time to go through the official process required to arrest a criminal? The hidden face of this doll museum was the answer.

It was a secret prison.

Even with guards patrolling around the clock, no one would question what was protected inside the unnecessarily thick walls and complex system of doors. No one cared what was inside the vault. The facility had all of the convenient excuses needed to build a prison right in the middle of the city.

"A building meant to store humanoid objects is actually used to strip actual humans of their rights and imprison them. Whoever made this has a sense of humor."

"The Professor won't be beaten by something like this!"

"Personally, I'd prefer she isn't some powerful enemy."

The pamphlet had a general map of the building, but it would not be very reliable here.

Shokuhou closed it, threw it in her handbag, and looked up.

It looked like the granite ground had been levelled off and polished to a shine. At the center of that perfect square of land was a cubic structure that resembled a giant die.

It was the doll museum which was actually something like a medieval tower used to unofficially imprison and punish people.

Bright lights on the ground illuminated the outside of the cubic doll museum and the "official side" had long since closed. The lights were meant to prevent that building alone from sinking into darkness and giving people a creepy impression.

"Just to be clear, there's nothing you can do if you're caught inside. You'll be thrown in a cell without a trial, so normal Anti-Skill won't show up and I doubt you'll have a chance to escape."

"(That might be what they're after. This doll's very existence is enough to know someone is obsessed with Academy City's #5.)"

"?"

"Anyway, continuing on is the only way to find the truth."

"But how? This place is as impregnable as Alcatraz."

"Isn't it obvious?"

Shokuhou pulled a TV remote from her handbag and spun it in her hand like a gunman.

"Through the main entrance of course☆"

Part 3

Once again, Shokuhou Misaki was one of Academy City's seven Level 5s and her power was Mental Out, the most powerful of the purely mental powers. No matter what kind of formation the enemy had laid out, she could control all of the doll museum's guards and walk right past them.

But at the same time, there was nothing she could do about the cameras, sensors, and other security devices. If shutters closed on either side of her and poison gas was sprayed out like in a spy movie, she would be defeated right then and there.

With that in mind...

“If I have to choose between humans and machines, of course I’ll go with the humans.”

“I really don’t like that opinion, you know? And what if you win over the humans but the place is full of traps like an ancient pyramid?”

“The guards will have a safe route hidden away in case of a fire or riot. If I ask them where that is, I can ignore all of the thick doors and over-the-top traps.”

“What if this place prefers to abandon their grunts?”

“If all you do is punish people, they’ll start plotting rebellion. You need to show them your reward ability every so often☆”

Controlling people to gather the requisite information was a lot like the story of the Straw Millionaire. She did not know what information anyone had until she contacted them, but once she did control them, she could create a path to the next target using their connections and relationships. The time it took to find the answer had a lot to do with luck.

Afterwards, Shokuhou Misaki was walking through a tunnel that did not exist on the maps.

The long, long tunnel ended at the deepest part of the prison and she arrived after walking through a round door much like a bank vault.

Like rows of lockers, both sides of the hallway were lined with sparkling obsidian-like doors that were reminiscent of a refrigerator in a trendy kitchen.

The color left one of them and it became transparent.

The doors were apparently LCD blinds.

Inside was a woman in her sixties or seventies who wore the simple shirt and pants supplied to her.

She stared over at Shokuhou while sitting on the bed like a boxer waiting for the start of a match.

Her voice arrived through a speaker.

“You aren’t one of the usual guards.”

“Are you the Professor?”

“If you’re calling me that... I see. So Misaki sent you here.”

“Do you know how it feels to have a doll like that made of you? I’d like to have a little chat about the abilities and objective of Anatomy Mechatronics.”

“There is no chance of that leading to Mental Out. Not that I expect you would believe me.”

“...”

“For one thing, Anatomy Mechatronics is just one of several projects being run in parallel. That meant it alone did not have to fully achieve our objective.”

“Fully achieve your objective?”

“Preventing the loss of powerful espers...especially the Level 5s. Simply put, a method of permanently preserving you.” The old woman spoke in a low tone. “The Level 5s are extremely powerful resources, but they are also extremely difficult to produce or reproduce. Since we can’t get them back once we lose one, they can’t be sent into battle so easily. They’re a double-edged sword. But the way the world is headed, *that excuse won’t cut it anymore.*”

“Are you saying there are others working with you?”

“I don’t know what they are working on. Although I assume none of them have been stupid enough to reach for clone technology at this stage. But they are definitely using a variety of methods to isolate what makes you who you are in order to arrive as close as possible to the exact mechanism behind Mental Out.”

“In other words, it’s too hard to reach my level using standard methods, so you’re drawing on all of the practical ability you have?”

“As I said, the way the world is headed won’t allow for excuses.”

The Anatomy Mechatronics Misaki was like a puzzle piece and she had little meaning on her own, but that could change when combined with the other projects.

The strange part was how one of the people creating the puzzle did not have a view of the full picture.

Who could say whether the old woman was telling the truth or not and it was possible more was going on than even she knew.

“Academy City’s esper powers development is known to be based in the brain, but it’s also known that nothing is accomplished by having just a brain floating in a vat of preservative liquid. The body is also a part of the single large system, but the exact workings of that system are not yet understood. It’s too late if we lose something before realizing its importance, so Anatomy Mechatronics was tasked with preserving everything.”

“Then what about that crazy outfit?”

“All I did was preserve everything about the modeled individual. If it turned out like that, then the cause must lie in you.”

“What?”

Shokuhou Misaki looked down at Misaki in her handbag.

The doll wore a white and black bunny girl outfit. Had she seen it in a magazine or on TV as a kid? Or did she hope to wear something like that somewhere deep in her heart?

“Our vast stock of data will come in handy once we reach a slump. I have no idea how many decades or even centuries away that would be, though.”

“But that’s just what the higher ups want, right?” Shokuhou placed a hand on her hip in front of the transparent door. “What do *you* want? The higher ups must have given you this project because they thought they could use you, but the skill that made them think that was yours in the first place. What led to this? How did you gain the ability to reproduce human organs with pure technology?”

“Do you know why the oldest dolls were made?”

“To create a link to the dead?”

Shokuhou looked confused as she thought of the text in the doll museum’s pamphlet.

“Some were made to take on death in a person’s place. Others were replacements meant to summon the spirit and memories of someone who was lost. Objects modeled after humans were naturally used to create links to people.” The old woman’s voice sounded like old paper scraping together. “Even with the high-level management of Academy City, people still die. And no matter who it is, once they’re dead, they’re dead. It’s easy to say they live on in people’s hearts or that they’re smiling in some distant place, but in reality, *nothing remains.* Everything that has been built up over the years vanishes. That is the definition of death.”

"…"

"I wanted to preserve them anyway I could." The old woman's voice echoed through the cold cell. "I didn't want it to end with nothing but nice-sounding words. People deteriorate, vanish, and disappear into nothingness, so I wanted them to take part in the world's accumulation however they could. If there was some indelible data and if the dead could leave behind an exact model, I thought that might help someone or something eventually. That would throw them into the torrent of the world's accumulation instead of vanishing."

"What is your real job?"

"A teacher. Not that I can use that title anymore."

Shokuhou Misaki sighed.

Anatomy Mechatronics was a model of an esper. She thought for a moment on what that had originally meant.

She nearly accepted it, but then she frowned.

"Wait a second."

"What?"

"You created Anatomy Mechatronics because you couldn't allow the dead students and espers to return to the earth without leaving anything behind, right?"

"What about it?"

"Then why did you create one of me? That doesn't fit your reasoning."

"You hadn't realized?"

"Realized what?"

"I only create models of students who have died or those whose death cannot be avoided. My work would lose all meaning otherwise."

"That's why I'm asking why you would create a model of me."

"That explanation wasn't enough?"

The old woman in a prison uniform stared at Shokuhou's face while sitting on the bed.

The #5 girl sensed a hint of pity in the woman's eyes.

"*You will die soon. That result has already been calculated out.*"

Shokuhou Misaki's mind briefly went blank.

She felt a disturbing tenseness along her cheeks.

"What are you...talking about?"

"I have created forty-seven Anatomy Mechatronics in all. ...Do you understand, #5? Even without explaining my exact calculation method, that number proves my experience and accuracy. Those dolls of death can be seen as a direct link to that conclusion."

"..."

Shokuhou Misaki's image of that small doll was flipped upside down.

This was not a doll that grieving parents made to decorate their lost child's room. It may have begun that way, but they now had a completely different meaning for those they were modeled after.

Just like a strange French doll or straw doll, they themselves had become symbols of harm.

"When... will I die?"

"You haven't noticed your own approaching demise?"

"I need specifics."

"What good would that do? There is no avoiding it now."

"Just tell me already!!"

The old woman tilted her head a little at Shokuhou's shout.

Then she replied in her rough low voice that sounded like old paper rubbing together.

"*Right this very instant.*"

Shokuhou gasped but was not given time to turn around.

After a few dry gunshots, she felt several scorching jabs of pain in her back. Her entire body went limp, she fell to her knees, and then she collapsed to the floor. She tried to breathe in but could not. As her vision grew dark and refused to recover, her conscious cut out.

Part 4

With a series of metallic clicks, several locks were released.

The thick, transparent door opened outward and a young man spoke to the old woman sitting on the cell's bed.

He was supposedly one of the doll museum's guards.

"Sorry about the wait. We need to be out of here within ten minutes."

"You know the route, I assume."

"We will follow the one Shokuhou Misaki used to get in."

Even with the key to the cell, they could not break through the facility's many doors and security devices, so they had needed someone who could pinpoint a way around all that.

"What is that?"

"I have gathered all of the materials you requested. Whether you can build what you need is up to your own skill."

The old woman and young man conversed as they stepped out of the cell's door.

A small doll crawled out of the handbag and yelled something at the corpse on the floor.

"Should we destroy that?"

"Don't bother. Misaki won't be able to track us down."

They began to leave the doll museum using a tunnel not on the map.

“As soon as we leave, I need to get to work on my final project.”

“Of course.”

“Because before long, this city will be forever lost.”

Part 5

It felt like having a really sturdy bubble caught in her throat.

The girl herself did not know what exactly had happened, but her throat convulsed and the bubble burst.

She may have been imagining it, but that was when life returned to Shokuhou Misaki.

“Cough! Cough, cough!! Ugh...!?”

“Ahh, ahh. So you’re fiiiiinally awake!”

“Damn. *I’d put paint bullets in the guards’ guns*, but a few shots at close range must have been enough to rob me of my consciousness ability.”

She got up from the cold floor as she spat out the words.

Her pulse was still irregular and her head felt somehow heavy, but she sluggishly managed to ask Anatomy Mechatronics Misaki a question.

“Where’s that old woman?”

“I don’t know. She seems to have left through the tunnel we used.”

“Does that mean we were just her means to escape?”

“The Professor said she would be working on her ‘final project’. She also said something about Academy City being lost before long.”

While Shokuhou’s words were mixed with irritated barbs, Misaki’s tone was somehow sad.

She had ran through the city night and contacted Shokuhou Misaki to rescue the Professor, but then her creator had passed right by her on the way to the exit.

It had all been for herself and she had left her “child” in the cold prison.

“Sigh...”

Shokuhou gave a single heavy sigh and brushed her long honey-blonde hair from her shoulders.

She then looked over to the small doll who was sitting on the floor and hanging her head.

“What exactly are you, anyway?”

“...?”

“I know that you have the exact same arrangement of bones and organs as me, but that Professor didn’t have the technological ability to reproduce the brain at the base of my powers. Then what is it that’s making you feel so disappointed?”

This was a simple test.

The Anatomy Mechatronics replied without turning around or raising her head.

“I don’t know.”

In a way, that was the worst possible answer.

If a program could not define itself, no one could complain if it froze up.

“How am I supposed to know what ‘I’ am?”

But Shokuhou Misaki narrowed her eyes a little when she heard it.

She did not know how to define that doll.

Nor did she know what was creating these thought patterns in place of a brain.

But that was an answer a perfect machine could not give.

A mere program could never put off defining itself and yet continue thinking.

“There’s no helping it then...”

Shokuhou grabbed the doll between her thumb and forefinger.

“Wait! Wh-what are you doing!?”

“What you are or how you’re defined doesn’t matter and I truly don’t care what that old woman is plotting.”

Shokuhou looked the doll in the eye as she continued.

“But she used me to escape this place and she’s walking free after abusing the mysterious logic inside you. Doesn’t that seem like more than enough of a reason to make her pay?”

“…”

The doll...no, the person named Misaki remained silent for a while.

That old woman was her foundation. While it was frustrating to be used by her, she also did not want to be her enemy.

The inability to reach an immediate answer also seemed like a difference from a mere computer.

“What exactly are you thinking of doing? She’s a step ahead of us in everything and I don’t think we have any hints to figure out where she’s going next.”

“Oh? Have you already forgotten why I’m still alive?” Shokuhou spun the remote in her hand. “I already control every last one of the guards, including the old woman’s helper hiding among them☆”

Part 6

The old woman viewed the Academy City nightscape from a large passenger plane’s window.

A notebook-sized tablet sat in her lap. The body was transparent, so the circuit boards and electronics were visible.

It was known as the Urban Processor.

That one device was her final project.

(You could say this is more of a diorama than a doll.)

She looked down at the deluge of light below. Streetlights and headlights followed the roads and the high-rise buildings provided as many lights as they had windows. It almost looked like the data and energy moving throughout Academy City had been visualized and linked together like a spider web.

The exact same thing would be flowing through the tablet in her lap.

Its CPU was virtually reproducing Academy City's roads, train racks, water pipes, power lines, gas pipes, internet lines, and all other infrastructure as if storing an aerial photograph of the city on microfilm. The electric signals running through the semiconductors reproduced all of those currents and perfectly modelled the "pulse" of Academy City inside the computer.

Flipping the Urban Processor over and looking through the clear casing would reveal glass tubes several millimeters long packed in tight.

There were 512 small vacuum tubes in all and their role was to give free random access between Data A and Data B with no distinction between cause and effect. This system allowed the reproduction of how humans came up with and associated ideas in a way impossible for previous computers that thought only in ones and zeroes.

Those two things together created an extremely interesting ability that some might find incredibly frightening.

(The Urban Processor can recreate the 'movements' created by Academy City. Just as Misaki contains Shokuhou Misaki's speech pattern.)

Tendencies, fads, self-control, imagination, creation, as well as academic theses, technological invention, and product production. This computer would indefinitely produce the exact same data as Academy City. One could say this small tablet had become a second Academy City.

And at the same time, the speed of the signals running through the circuit boards could be changed and the speed of the city could be increased tenfold or more, like fast-forwarding a video. Once that happened, it was no longer the same as Academy City. It became the academic institution that Academy City would be decades or centuries in the future.

It was the ultimate model that could change the world.

The old woman's objective was to *bring it outside of Academy City*.

She had been imprisoned deep in that doll museum because she was far too dangerous and yet it would have been a waste of her talent to kill her.

"I have no reason to regret anything. I already have the same thing as you, after all."

She started to turn away from the window, but then the mass of light below seemed to squirm like an amoeba. As if she were looking at an electronic sign, the light completely ignored the locations of the buildings and roads as it moved around. It all formed a single meaningful screen.

It seemed to display the face of a girl with long honey-blonde hair.

"Oh? So this thing's really that valuable♪?"

A sweet voice slipped deep in the old woman's ears.

The unexplainable phenomenon continued.

She quickly focused inside the plane once more and found the tablet had vanished from her lap. The young man who should have been sitting next to her had also vanished. Instead, Academy City's #5 girl was waving the Urban Processer around.

"How did you catch up to me? Is one of your pawns a teleporter esper?"

"You still haven't figured it out?"

Immediately, everyone in the plane turned their heads to look at the old woman.

At first, she assumed Mental Out was controlling them all, but...

"No... That's right. It makes no sense for you to be on the plane. It doesn't even make sense for me to be on the plane. After all..."

"Yeah, I slipped into that doll museum pretty late. The last flight would have long since left and the airport itself would've been closed."

"That's why we decided to use a ground route instead. I was waiting for him to bring the car around, so why am I on a plane? Why didn't I question this!?"

“That’s what Mental Out will do to you.”

As soon as Shokuhou Misaki said that, everything in the plane, even the surface of the coffee being carried by a flight attendant, froze in place.

No, it was not limited to the plane. The unnatural nightscape outside the window had completely stopped moving.

The old woman realized she was trapped, but she had no way of knowing *where* she was trapped.

“I could always just *leave you here*.” Shokuhou Misaki spoke cruelly inside the stopped plane. “If you don’t want that, then tell me what you were trying to do with this dangerous thing.”

“If you want information, can’t you just look directly into my mind?”

“I already tried. Hadn’t you noticed you were thinking almost too much about the Urban Processor’s details? And a portion of your memories has been unnaturally overwritten. You probably filled your mind with a few different versions of the truth using self-suggestion, but since I can read them all, I can’t prove which one is the right answer.”

“The suggestion was added on later. ...The first thing you found is probably the correct one.”

“I see. In that case...”

“My objective has not changed since the beginning,” spat out the old woman inside the plane which felt like clear plastic had been poured in and allowed to harden. “If I know something will be lost, I cannot allow it to leave nothing behind. That’s why I have sent new projects into the world like the Anatomy Mechatronics and the Urban Processor. If I didn’t, how could I feel such great motivation?”

“You’re saying Academy City *will be destroyed soon*?”

“I can’t find any other answer.”

“So you want to leave a backup of the city in the farthest reaches of the world before it’s lost?”

“If I do that, Academy City can eventually be reconstructed somewhere. And even if it isn’t, its influence will remain in the world. ...So if you are trying to stop me, I can only think you are culling this city yourself because you wish to see it disappear.”

“Did it never occur to you that the destructive ability you fear could be caused by this tablet itself?”

“Think of it like Noah’s Ark. What would have happened if that story’s protagonist gave up on gathering every animal and instead went around telling all of his friends and family about the boat? That decision may have made him a beloved figure, but nothing would have remained afterwards. None of them would have had anything to eat and everyone he loved would have begun eating each other.”

“You seem to be making one major misunderstanding.”

“And what is that?”

“That story’s protagonist did not cause the flood. If he said he was going to use up the planet’s resources to build the boat, his family and friends would have ganged up on him to stop him.”

“The result would be no different.”

“But only using the logic of the god who flooded the planet to make a better world. Humans like to worry about the process and the cause, so I don’t think that’s something we could accept.”

“Are you saying the process leading me here included something you refuse to accept?”

“The doll you made never said a bad word about her ‘parent’ even after having her good will trampled on.”

“…”

“That isn’t just a digital sequence of commands. You created her, so wouldn’t you know that better than anyone?”

“How do you know there was good will behind that? Did you use your power to open it up?”

“Don’t be silly. You were so skilled that I was hesitant to open that box.”

“I see,” muttered the old woman under her breath. “You will lose everything.”

“Perhaps.”

“When the time comes, you will rue the decision you made today.”

“Even if I will, there are some things I can’t accept. If that changed, I think I would be more of a doll than a human.”

“Then promise me one thing.”

“?”

“Now that you have crushed one avenue of salvation, do not give up on this. Just as I pursued my methods, you protect Misaki with your own methods.”

Part 7

That old woman was apparently found sitting on a park bench late at night.

What happened to her afterwards is unknown.

However, a tablet computer was found next to her so badly damaged that it was nearly unrecognizable.

And an oddly kind expression could be seen on her wrinkled face.

Part 8

Shokuhou Misaki lay on her dorm room bed in only a bath towel.

In the end, the social studies field trip to the doll museum had been canceled due to unexpected circumstances. They had visited an aquarium instead and her introductory speech had been quite difficult without any advance information. She had repeatedly considered swinging her remote control around to implant memories of her giving an amazing speech.

The city would disappear soon.

Like a cursed doll, the old woman's words weighed heavily on Shokuhou Misaki's heart.

When she had done some investigation, she had learned of an organization named Gremlin invading Hawaii. Academy City was repeatedly equipping itself with high-level weaponry in response and they had even created an esper cyborg named Rensa.

That woman may not have been entirely wrong.

If those two forces clashed head-on or one of them used their power incorrectly, it would hardly be surprising if the framework known as "the world" was destroyed once or twice.

Shokuhou wondered what she would think when that happened.

To escape a more direct threat, she had destroyed the Urban Processor that could be seen as a backup of Academy City. She did not question her decision, but she understood that there had not been a sparklingly pure answer with no downside whatsoever.

If she did see that destruction firsthand, would she really be able to proudly say she had done nothing wrong?

Sow the seeds even if it means killing the tree.

Build the ark even it means sucking the world dry.

When faced with a pile of rubble, would she really continue to think that old woman had been wrong?

"Phew..."

She frowned at the heavy sigh filling the room.

Yes, it had not come from her.

She sat up and looked over to the small form sitting on the edge of the collapsible makeup table that she would hide under the bed when the dorm manager came around.

Shokuhou's shoulders drooped as she looked at that doll that looked so much like her.

It was possible she could build an ark and save a handful of people from the destruction of the world. But that would only leave the people who had trampled on some small expressions of good will and she would not call what awaited them a happy world.

She had rejected the old woman's path because she did not want to see that.

Now that she had refused to board the boat, she would have to find some other path.

“After acting so tough there, I guess I’ll have to look after the world myself.”

♦

It was unclear whether it had anything to do with the old woman’s prediction, but destruction truly was approaching.

Only two days remained until Magic God Othinus, leader of Gremlin, would hold that lance in her hand.

KAMACHI KAZUMA SPECIAL INTERVIEW

About the Shokuhou Misaki Figurine

——What do you think now that you've seen the completed Shokuhou Misaki figurine?

The sense of volume from the front or the side is incredible! The stand, wings, and ears really give it a strong impression of being three-dimensional. When we first decided to make a Shokuhou figurine, it was supposed to be in her uniform, so I couldn't help but think "This sure changed!" (laugh). I had suggested making it an outfit you wouldn't normally see, so they must have wanted to see a three-dimensional Love Angel Bunny Maid.

I think she really likes to stand out and she probably doesn't like clothes that hide her bodyline. I have a feeling she boldly exposes a lot of skin when she wears a party dress. At any rate, this unusual look at Shokuhou Misaki has a powerful presence to it and it's worth seeing for the impact alone.

——I was worried it wouldn't look much like Shokuhou anymore with the outfit changed so much, but I was relieved to see it was definitely her with the stars in the eyes.

To be honest, my original idea was for the pattern in her eyes to be digital contact lenses that become spirals or stars based on her emotions. At some point it settled on only being stars and became her trademark.

——One of the figurine's notable features is the board that was designed by Akitaka-sensei.

The shape and coloring are really cool, aren't they? The underside is really detailed (laugh). There haven't been many flying machines in the main story, so I think it would really stand out if I had it show up there. But in a battle series, once you have one person flying, you have to have everyone flying. That would be taking everything to a new field, so I think it would be pretty difficult to have it show up... (laugh). Maybe if it was a limited-time-only item or something.

An Unprecedented Figurine Bonus! About the Short Story

——You wrote a short story as a bonus for the figurine, but I was honestly surprised at how serious a story it was.

I don't like writing some simple slice of life story just because it's only a bonus short story. They've also asked me to write novels as anime DVD bonuses and I've decided to take them all just as seriously.

——A story about "Misaki" who looks just like Shokuhou was perfect for a figurine bonus.

For a bonus story, I sometimes write things I wasn't able to fit in the main novels, but this time I thought up something brand new once the figurine project was started. Since I had the opportunity, I decided to write a story that fit the project by focusing on dolls and figurines. It's nice to include supernatural powers and technologies that make you wish they were real when reading about them, right? I came up with this while thinking that people who love figurines would probably love to have one that could move and talk like a real person.

——That is the ultimate dream of figurine fans (laugh). You wrote a story about Shokuhou in New Testament – A Certain Magical Index 11, but can we expect her to be involved even more from now on?

Before, I couldn't just casually have her show up because I was afraid people would excessively suspect there was some deeper meaning behind it. But thanks to Volume 11, I think the readers will now view her the same way I do, so I think I'll have her pop up in the slice of life scenes from now on.

——I hope you'll have "Misaki" show up when you do (laugh).

Well, I hadn't shown her room before this, so I do think I could have that figurine there in her room (laugh).

The Finale is Here! Looking Back at the 10 Projects

——How about we look back at the 10 projects for your 10th anniversary project?

When you continue doing something like writing for a long time, you tend to get too narrowly focused, so I want to begin a variety of projects and get involved in other industries to expand my own horizons. They're all amazing, but the ones I directly worked

on are the new novel The Unexplored Summon://Blood-Sign and the crossover novel The Circumstances Leading to a Certain Magical Heavy Zashiki Warashi's Simple Killer Queen's Marriage.

Those started when I was speaking with my editor about wanting to do something for my 10th anniversary as an author. The crossover novel was originally supposed to be a magazine-serialized story, but we ended up expanding it because that many characters wasn't going to fit in a short story.

——There's also going to be an anime for your popular series Heavy Object, right?

Heavy Object was a series I began in between A Certain Magical Index 18 and 19. After writing nearly twenty volumes, I had built up a lot of material I was having trouble finding a way to use. I had enough to make a completely new story, so I did so as Heavy Object. It's also possible I might not have made it into a new series altogether and instead thrown Quenser and Heivia into Academy City.

I'm glad the series is getting an anime for the important turning point of my 10th anniversary. I'm looking forward to seeing their idiocy reproduced in anime form.

(This interview is an edited version of one included in the January 2015 Issue of Dengeki Hobby Magazine.)